

Eliot as a Dramatist : A Study in Eliot's Theory and Practice of Poetic Drama of 1919 to 1934

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Preface

In trying to understand the nature of Eliot's achievement as a dramatist, there are two things we can look at : the plays themselves and his essays on plays and playwrights. As F. O. Matthiessen observed : "(Eliot's) theory of poetry has been borne out by his practice, and both have been greatly influential now throughout a generation,"¹ it is generally known that the interaction between his actual output and his criticism is very illuminating to the understanding of his poems. What about this interaction in the case of his poetic drama?

In the course of the same essay F. O. Matthiessen said further that "(Eliot's) conception of drama, his belief in the need for poetic drama, still remain more in the realm of theory even in his own experiments,"² but Eliot's essays and articles concerning drama criticism also seem to make an illuminating guide to the purposes which he attempted to realize in his experiments for the theatre.

In this connection the essays on poetic drama and on Elizabethan dramatists which were written between the end of the First World War and the early thirties are particularly revealing. Edmund Wilson pointed out Eliot's "continual pre-occupation with the possibilities of a poetic drama — that is to say, of modern drama in verse."³ Eliot was developing an intense interest, almost a passion for poetic drama at the same period.

The purpose of this study is to survey Eliot's development as a dramatist before his first full-scale play, *Murder in the Cathedral* was written in 1935. More

specifically, it is to examine from the theoretical and practical point of view how Eliot had come to grips with the problems of poetic drama between the end of the First World War and the early thirties.

Although this study is only a part of the analysis of one important element in Eliot's complex development, if we understand how exceptionally deep and strong Eliot's impulse to drama is, we will know the importance of Eliot's plays and his essays on plays in his total achievement.

I. "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama"

At the beginning of his 1920 essay, "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" Eliot raises "the questions — why there is no poetic drama today, how the stage has lost all hold on literary art, why so many poetic plays are written which can only be read, and read, if at all, without pleasure — have become insipid, almost academic,"¹ despite the fact that most poets hanker for stage and that "a not negligible public appears to want verse plays."²

Through the above-quoted questions it can be seen that as early as 1920 Eliot was very much interested in the problem of poetic drama in the contemporary world. In fact, there was no serious drama; there was no really artistic drama. What he did was to begin to probe into the causes of the decay of English poetic drama.

The first question which naturally comes to him is this: what has led to the present state when no poetic drama worth mentioning exists? Eliot says that "the drama is perhaps the most permanent, is capable of greater variation and of expressing more varied types of society, than any other."³ Eliot believed that there are those imperceptible and unfathomable depths and ranges of human emotions where only the poetic drama can have an access.

One of the causes of the decay of poetic drama in the present age Eliot attributes to the lack of "a continuous tradition."⁴ He feels that the death of dramatic form in England was introduced by Charles Lamb's analysis of the Elizabethan drama which brought the consciousness of tremendous gap between present and past. The outcome was that we could not believe in a dramatic tradition, which meant our loss of a hold on the present.

Another problem which Eliot had to face was that he felt that whereas

permanent literature is always "either a presentation of thought, or a presentation of feeling by a state of events in human action or objects in the external world,"⁵ the present age had inherited the nineteenth century "mentality"⁶ which attempted to embody a philosophy. Eliot thought that a creation of art should not embody a philosophy, but replace the philosophy.

What he found in poetic drama being written in late nineteenth and early twentieth century was "the undigested 'idea' or philosophy, the idea-emotion."⁷ Eliot criticized Goethe's *Faust*, Ebsen's *Peer Gynt*, and the plays of M. Maeterlinck and M. Claudel because they were based on a philosophy, an "idea-emotion," in "the attempt to supply the defect of structure by an internal structure,"⁸ by quoting Butcher's translation of the *Poetics* : "But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action, and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action not a quality."⁹

Eliot regarded drama as "an imitation of life." According to Eliot, the only standard which could be allowed for drama was "The standard of the work of art."¹⁰ From this point of view Eliot repudiated the Shavian drama as well as the Maeterlinckian drama. He considered the drama of both Shaw and Maeterlinck as having lost contact with the work of art.

Eliot thought that a play was not a philosophy, that any play which was intended as a vehicle for a philosophy had to fail as a work of art. He believed that what the dramatist must do is to present a view of life in artistic form.

Eliot defined the essential characteristic of poetic drama as follows : "The essential is not, of course, that drama should be written in verse.... The essential is to get upon the stage this precise statement of life which is at the same time a point of view, a world—a world which the author's mind has subjected to a complete process of simplification. I do not find that any drama which "embodies a philosophy" of the author's (like *Faust*) or which illustrates any social theory (like Shaw's) can possibly fulfil the requirements — though a place might be left for Shaw if not for Goethe. And the world of Ibsen and the world of Tchekov are not enough simplified, universal."¹¹

To return to the Elizabethan Age : Eliot thought that much of the success of the Elizabethan playwrights was due to the presence of a form. Therefore they

could devote themselves to absorbing "a great quantity of new thoughts and new images."¹² Eliot saw the contemporary age as "a formless age."¹³ The nineteenth century too, like the twentieth century lacked a form, although Wordsworth and Browning attempted to devise forms for themselves. Dante did not have to waste the years of youth in "metric invention."¹⁴ Shakespeare was fortunate in having had a crude form, capable of indefinite refinement and to be the person to see its possibilities. It can be seen that Eliot considered the chief cause of the dearth of good poetic drama to be the problem of form.

By form Eliot did not merely mean "a shape, a rhyme or rhythm."¹⁵ It included the whole appropriate content of this rhyme or rhythm as well. The Elizabethan dramatist was provided not merely blank verse, the structure of the five-act play, but also "the temper of the age,"¹⁶ all of which Eliot found missing in the twentieth century.

At the end of the essay Eliot suggested that the attempts of the contemporary dramatists "confect a poetic drama"¹⁷ had begun at the "wrong end"¹⁸ because they had aimed at the small public which wanted poetry. He had come to the conclusion that "The Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry ; our problem should be to take a form of entertainment, and subject it to the process which would leave it a form of art. Perhaps the music-hall comedian is the best material."¹⁹ Eliot recommended that the modern dramatists should start with "a form of entertainment" such as the music hall.

In the nineteen-twenties the music hall was the most popular means of entertainment in England. It can be judged from the fact that he wrote a tribute to a great artist of the music hall, Marie Lloyd at her death in 1922 or 1923 that he valued this type of popular entertainment. He called her "the greatest music-hall artist of her time in England."²⁰ He expressed his appreciation of her as follows : "It was, I think, this capacity for expressing the soul of the people that made Marie Lloyd unique, and that made her audiences, even when they joined in the chorus, not so much hilarious as happy."²¹

Eliot saw in the music-hall the best means of achieving a form of art which would be capable of being understood by all kinds of people. Eliot said that "The working man who went to the music hall and saw Marie Lloyd and joined in the

chorus was himself performing part of the art, he was engaged in that collaboration of the audience with the artist which is necessary in all art and most obviously in dramatic art.”²² That is, music hall offered two of the most important functions of dramatic art : giving entertainment to the audience, and attracting the audience into collaboration with the artist. He seemed to have sought in the music hall a vehicle as valuable to the modern dramatist as the Elizabethan theatre was for Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

Eliot believed that any hope for a popular drama would spring from the robust entertainment of the lower class and not from the “morally corrupted middle class.”²³ Music hall seemed to have provided the inspiration for his first experiment in drama, *Sweeney Agonistes*, but in actuality there was gap between Eliot’s interest in the music hall and *Sweeney Agonistes*.

II. “Four Elizabethan Dramatists”

It can be seen from his long series of Elizabethan essays that Eliot had already been absorbed with the great age of the English theatre. We find historical assessments and a number of criteria for drama in his many essays on Elizabethan dramatists. Above all, his 1924 essay on “Four Elizabethan Dramatists” is particularly enlightening concerning Eliot’s point of view on Elizabethan drama.

In the beginning of the essay Eliot says : “The statement and explication of a conviction about such an important body of dramatic literature, toward what is in fact the only distinct form of dramatic literature that England has produced, should be something more than an exercise in mental ingenuity or in refinement of taste : it should be something of revolutionary influence on the future of drama. Contemporary literature, like contemporary politics, is confused by the moment-to-moment struggle for existence ; but the time arrives when an examination of principles is necessary. I believe that the theatre has reached a point at which a revolution in principles should take place.”¹

The sharp tone of this statement makes one feel that Eliot desired a reform in the modern drama, a radical transformation of the contemporary theatre at least at this stage. Eliot’s attitude toward the contemporary drama was a negative one. It is not too much to say that the contemporary drama or the prose drama was an

enemy for Eliot. Eliot began in revolt against the contemporary stage.

On the other hand, his study of Elizabethan drama had a more positive direction. Eliot was deeply aware that the Elizabethan drama represented the most outstanding achievement of drama in the history of English literature. Furthermore, it was very relevant and essential to Eliot's position that the Elizabethan drama was verse drama that is poetic drama, because Eliot believed firmly that verse is necessary to genuine poetic creations.

Thus Eliot was greatly indebted to the Elizabethan drama for his case against the enemy. In this connection the 1924 essay on "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" had a close association with the two essays: "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" and "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" of 1920 and 1928 respectively. These three essays overlap to some extent.

The publication in 1923 of William Archer's *The Old Drama and the New* was of great importance to Eliot, because it became the ideal stimulation for him at this point, bringing him to make a counter-attack in the form of a declaration against contemporary drama. In replying to Archer, Eliot rejected him, together with Swinburne, whom he respected as a critic.

Archer held the view that "a play need not be literature at all"² and that poetry and drama are two different things. Swinburne maintained the view that "plays exist as literature."³ Eliot pointed out that they both in fact regarded Elizabethan drama primarily as literature and not as drama. Swinburne as well as Archer believed that the difference between modern drama and Elizabethan drama was represented by "a gain of dramatic technique and the loss of poetry."⁴

Eliot held that Archer criticized the Elizabethan drama for the wrong reasons: Archer supposed that Elizabethan drama was not realistic enough and not as good as modern drama. But Eliot sees that "The weakness of the Elizabethan drama is not its defect of realism, but its attempt at realism; not its conventions, but its lack of conventions."⁵ He also holds the opinion that the weakness of the modern drama is the same weakness as that of the Elizabethan drama, that is to say, the lack of a convention.

Here we need to know his definition of the two words: realism and convention. Of realism he has written: "The great vice of English drama from Kyd to Galsworthy has been that its aim of realism was unlimited. In one play,

Everyman, and perhaps in that one play only, we have a drama within the limitations of art ; since Kyd, ..., there has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is perceived by the most commonplace mind.... In a play of Aeschylus, we do not find that certain passages are literature and other passages drama, every style of utterance in the play bears a relation to the whole and because of this relation is dramatic in itself. The imitation of life is circumscribed, and the approaches to ordinary speech and withdrawals from ordinary speech are not without relation and effect upon each other. It is essential that a work of art should be self-consistent, that an artist should consciously or unconsciously draw a circle beyond which he does not trespass : on the one hand actual life is always the material, and on the other hand an abstraction from actual life is a necessary condition to the creation of the work of art.”⁶

Here we see Eliot's objections to realism in drama. Eliot feels that the Elizabethans sought realism with their plays by going in several different directions but they failed. Eliot suggests that the prejudice against verse is connected with the problem of realism in drama. Eliot expresses his admiration of the morality play, *Everyman*, and Aeschylus. Eliot regards them as models. Eliot desires in a work of art an ideal relationship of the parts to the whole which he believed could be achieved only by abstraction from reality.

As to the definition of the word convention Eliot means any convention apparent in subject matter, in treatment, in verse or dramatic form, or in general philosophy of life. He says further : “It may be some quite new selection or structure or distortion in subject matter or technique ; any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action.”⁷

Eliot's own main criticism toward Elizabethan drama may be summed up in his remark that “The art of the Elizabethans is an impure art.”⁸ By this Eliot means that the Elizabethans confused the matter by not determining firmly what should be their conventions and what should not. But Eliot admits that they were moving toward form. Eliot supposes that they made up a general philosophy, based on Seneca and such influences which we find in Shakespeare as in the others ; more specifically, “a general philosophy of life” based on “the Senecan

attitude of Pride, the Montaigne attitude of Scepticism, and the Machiavelli attitude of Cynicism.”⁹

Eliot’s definition of form is implied in the following sentences : “Since Kyd, ..., there has been no form to arrest, so to speak, the flow of spirit at any particular point before it expands and ends its course in the desert of exact likeness to the reality which is received by the most commonplace mind.”¹⁰ The discussion of the word “form” also occurs in the 1928 essay on “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry.” We will examine it in the next chapter.

At this stage Eliot felt the necessity of a new kind of dramatic form, but it was quite clear that he did not conceive of a revival of poetic drama through simple imitation of the Elizabethan forms.

III. “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry”

The general drift of argument in the 1928 essay on “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry” is to review the possibility of poetic drama. Eliot’s main concern in relation to the theatre was always the revival of poetic drama in the contemporary world. And his starting point was the belief that “the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature.”¹

The reasons for his choice of verse drama and not prose drama are that “prose drama is a slight by-product of verse drama. The human soul, in intense emotion, strives itself in verse.... The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial ; if we want to get at the permanent and universal we tend to express ourselves in verse.”² Eliot’s belief in the value of poetic drama was based on its richer resources for transcending “the ephemeral and superficial” and for concentrating upon “the permanent struggles and conflicts of human beings.”³

What, then, was poetic drama according to Eliot? He thought of it chiefly in terms of verse as opposed to prose. And rhythm was one of qualities he thought essential. Eliot remarked : “The essentials of the drama were, as we might expect, given by Aristotle : ‘poetry, music, and dancing constitute in Aristotle a group by themselves, their common element being imitation by means of rhythm—rhythm which admits of being applied to words, events, and the movements of

the body.' It is the rhythm, so utterly absent from modern drama, either verse or prose...."⁴ This statement, taken from an article called "The Beating of a Drum" (1923), makes it clear that by rhythm Eliot did not simply mean metrical rhythm. In fact, in the same article he went on to associate rhythm with ritual, and ritual with dance. "The drama was originally ritual, and ritual, consisting of a set of repeated movements, is essentially a dance."⁵ Like Yeats and Valery, Eliot was very much fascinated with the nature of ballet. We will get back on this point later.

To return to the problem of poetic versus prose drama : at the start of Eliot's career as a dramatist, Eliot had to face the difficult situation that prose drama had expelled poetic drama from the public stage, though Yeats and the Abbey Theatre were making a limited revival of plays in verse. For that reason he had to establish the superiority of poetic drama over prose drama and he had to try to establish the necessity of poetic drama.

The theme of verse drama versus prose drama is taken up in his essay "A Dialogue" where we find a vehement attack upon prose drama. Eliot points out that people have tended "to think of verse as a restriction upon drama. They think that the emotional range, and the realistic truth, of drama is limited and circumscribed by verse. Only prose can give the full gamut of modern feeling, can correspond to actuality."⁶

Another difficulty is that people think of poetic drama artificial. Eliot argues against this view saying that "But is not every dramatic representation artificial?"⁷ That is to say, Eliot holds that it is not poetic drama alone that is artificial, but prose drama as well as verse drama is artificial. He discusses the question of poetry and drama in the dialogue where he says : "The greatest drama is poetic drama, and dramatic defects can be compensated by poetic excellence."⁸ This belief is what was later to become the foundation of Eliot's theory. That is, Eliot's contention was that the best dramatic speech is verse.

Further in the dialogue Eliot insists that there is no relation between poetry and drama. But elsewhere he seems to say that there is an essential relationship between poetry and drama : "If drama tends to poetic drama, not by adding an embellishment, and still less by limiting its scale, we should expect a dramatic poet like Shakespeare to write his finest poetry in his most dramatic scenes.

And this is just what we do find : *what makes it most dramatic is what makes it most poetic....* The same plays are the most poetic and the most dramatic, and this is not by a concurrence of two activities, but by the full expression of one and the same activity. I agree that the dramatist who is not a poet is so much the less the dramatist.”⁹ This passage is of central importance. It states the ideal condition of dramatic poetry, to which Eliot sees Shakespeare approaching nearest. It can also be made a central principle of the poetics of drama. It was what Eliot believed at this stage to be the essential connection between poetry and drama.

In the two essays, “‘Rhetoric’ and Poetic Drama” written in 1919 and “Philip Massinger” of 1920 we see Eliot’s early concept of poetic drama. In the former Eliot wrote : “It must take genuine and substantial human emotions, such emotions as observation can confirm, typical emotions, and give them artistic form.... In Shakespeare the form is determined in the unity of the whole, as well as, single scenes ; it is something to attain this unity....”¹⁰

In the latter he wrote : “The poetic drama must have an emotional unity, let the emotion be whatever you like. It must have a dominant tone ; and if this be strong enough, the most heterogeneous emotions may be made to reinforce it.”¹¹ Unity is one of the principles of art and the Aristotelian dramatic unities were always a concern of Eliot’s : “The unities have for me, at least, a perpetual fascination. I believe that they will be found highly desirable for the drama of the future. For one thing, we want more concentration.”¹²

Turning to the nature of the enrichment that verse can give to drama, in 1934 Eliot wrote about the distinction between poetic drama and prose drama in his essay on “John Marston” : “It is possible that what distinguishes poetic drama from prosaic drama is a kind of doubleness in the action, as if it took place on two planes at once.... In poetic drama a certain apparent irrelevance may be the symptom of this doubleness ; or the drama has underpattern, less manifest than the theatrical one. We sometimes feel, in following the words and behaviour of some of the characters of Dostoevsky, that they are living at once on the plane which we are shut out : their behaviour does not seem crazy, but rather in conformity with the laws of some world that we cannot perceive.”¹³ The kind of poetry he contemplated had to do with the discovery of “some other plane of

reality.”

In this regard Eliot spoke of “several levels of significance” in the conclusion to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* of 1933. Eliot thought that poetic drama could be appreciated on “several levels of significance.” He wrote : “In a play of Shakespeare you get several levels of significance. For the simplest auditors there is the plot, for the more thoughtful the character and conflict of character, for the more literary the words and phrasing, for the more musically sensitive the rhythm, and for auditors of greater sensitiveness and understanding a meaning which reveals itself gradually.”¹⁴ Here Eliot has added another feature to his requirements for poetic drama : different levels of meaning.

In the Introduction to G. Wilson Knight’s *The Wheel of Fire*, in 1930 Eliot wrote : “The writer of poetic drama is not merely a man skilled in two arts and skillful to weave them together ; he is not a writer who can decorate a play with poetic language and metre. His task is different from that of the “dramatist” or that of the “poet,” for his pattern is more complex and dimensional....The genuine poetic drama must, at its best, observe all the regulations of the plain drama, but will weave them organically ... into a much richer design.”¹⁵ A poetic dramatist is not a writer who can decorate a play with poetic language and metre.

As we have seen from the above statements, Eliot believed that verse is capable of “saying more” ; that words in verse have potentially a richer meaning than they have in prose.

Turning to “A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry” : Eliot cites again the satisfying formality of the ballet. One of the speakers remarks that “Here (in the Russian ballet) seemed to be everything that we wanted in drama except the poetry.”¹⁶ The ballet is unconsciously concerned with “a permanent form.”¹⁷ It is “a system of physical training, of traditional, symbolical and highly skilled movements. It is a liturgy of very wide adaptability.”¹⁸

But the mention of liturgy leads on to the remark that “the consummation of the drama, the perfect and ideal drama, is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass... that drama springs from religious liturgy, and that it cannot afford to depart far from religious liturgy.... When drama has ranged as far as it has in our own day, is not the only solution to return to religious liturgy? And the only dramatic satisfaction that I find now is in a High Mass well performed. Have you

not there everything necessary? And indeed, if you consider the ritual of the Church during the cycle of the year you have complete drama represented. The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities ; but in the Church year you have represented the full drama of creation.”¹⁹

Eliot says : “For man lives in various degree. We need … religious faith. And we also need amusement.... Literature can be no substitute for religion, not merely because we need religion, but because we need literature as well as religion. And religion is no more a substitute for drama than drama is a substitute for religion.”²⁰ This is the core of Eliot’s theory of literature.

Further he says : “But we are human beings, and crave representations in which we are conscious, and critical, of these other realities. We cannot be aware solely of divine realities. We must be aware also of human realities. And we crave some liturgy less divine, something in respect of which we shall be more spectators and less participants. Hence we want the human drama, related to the divine drama, but not the same, as well as the Mass.”²¹ Here is stated the essential connection between the drama and religious liturgy. This is also the core of Eliot’s dramatic theory.

Through one of the speakers in the dialogue Eliot states his opinion that the relation between realism and liturgy in drama depends on the time : “When the age has a set religious practice and belief, then the drama can and should tend towards realism, I say towards, I do not say arrive at.... The more fluid, the more chaotic the religious and ethical beliefs, the more the drama must tend in the direction of liturgy.”²²

On the whole Eliot sees the Elizabethan Age “a period of chaos.”²³ Eliot’s own age, in his view, is another period of chaos. One of the speakers in the dialogue says that “it is as much the lack of moral and social conventions as the lack of artistic conventions that stands in the way of poetic drama today.”²⁴ But if the Elizabethans could produce great poetic drama in spite of their handicaps, why could we the moderns not manage to produce it? This question is asked by one of the speakers. And another speaker replies optimistically that “we are not going to be deterred by a fatalistic philosophy of history from wanting a poetic drama, and from believing that there must be some way of getting it.”²⁵ Here the meaning of “a fatalistic philosophy of history” is that “there is no precedent for a

nation having two great periods of drama."²⁶

Eliot holds the view that "our suburban drama is morally sound, and out of such soundness poetry comes."²⁷ Therefore the practical suggestion he makes is that we should produce plays of our own so that we might learn at least by practice. He goes on to assert that "the craving for poetic drama is permanent in human nature." The more specific suggestion is that "We must find a new form of verse which shall be as satisfactory a vehicle for us as blank verse was for the Elizabethans."²⁸ This is the conclusion Eliot comes to in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry." This essentially repeats an idea that Eliot put forward in the conclusion of "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama".

IV. *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock*

So far we have surveyed the situation of the twenties from the theoretical point of view. In it Eliot has come to the conclusion that our desire for poetic drama should be kept alive, that small interested groups should experiment independently of the commercial theatre, and that a new form of verse should be found that could do for the present age what blank verse performed for the Elizabethans.

A year or two before he wrote his "Dialogue", Eliot had already tried his hand at writing a play. He first published "Fragments of a Prologue" in the *New Criterion* of October 1926 and "Fragments of an Agon" in January 1927, both were under the title of "Wanna Go Home, Baby?" It was not until 1932 that the two fragments were issued in a book form and the title changed to *Sweeney Agonistes : Fragments of an Aristophanic Melodrama*.

This unfinished dramatic work, *Sweeney Agonistes*, was begun in 1924. It showed that Eliot was very conscious of the need to develop a new form of verse drama, and to discover a new form of verse. Edmund Wilson observed in *Axel's Castle* that "there can be no question that the future of drama in verse, if it has any future, lies in some such direction."¹

When he was writing *Sweeney Agonistes*, Eliot was already convinced that "we cannot reinstate either blank verse or the heroic couplet. The next form of drama will have to be a verse drama, but in new verse forms. At any rate, the

recognized forms of speech-verse are not as efficient as they should be ; probably a new form will be devised out of colloquial speech.”² It should be remembered that Aristotle himself says that the verse form of drama must be that which is the most colloquial.

The verse form of *Sweeney Agonistes* was Eliot’s experiment in the creation of a verse form derived from colloquial speech. As D. E. Jones asserts that Eliot’s purpose in writing *Sweeney Agonistes* was “to come to terms with the speech of the time,”³ there can be no doubt that this was one of Eliot’s chief concerns in *Sweeney Agonistes*. It has been agreed by critics that in the development of Eliot’s dramatic art *Sweeney Agonistes* is perhaps most important as an experiment in the introduction of contemporary rhythms and language into poetic drama.

In 1933 Eliot said in the conclusion to “*The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*” which was written a year or two before Eliot began to devote his creative energies to writing drama, that “The ideal medium for poetry, to my mind, and the most direct means of social usefulness for poetry, is the theatre.... Every poet would like, I fancy, to be able to think that he had some direct social utility.... He would like to convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a large audience, but to a larger groups of people collectively ; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it.”⁴

Here Eliot viewed the theatre as “the ideal medium for poetry.” This statement gives an explanation of why he turned to the writing of plays and made a confession of his own aspirations of social usefulness.

Eliot’s return to dramatic composition came the next year, 1934, when he was asked to do the Choruses for *The Rock*. Eliot’s first complete play, *Murder in the Cathedral*, appeared the next year, 1935. Eliot said about *The Rock* “that of only one scene — presumably the last scene in Part I — was he literally the author, and suggested that for only this scene and the Choruses was he responsible.”⁵ *The Rock*, a pageant play, was written in aid of a church building fund. Eliot was writing under the direction of E. Martin Browne, who wrote the scenario.

The Rock tended to be overlooked by dramatic critics, but it was of great importance to Eliot not only because he became interested in the possibilities of the dramatic form, but because many writers not only accepted the chorus but

broke away from the convention of blank verse which had dominated English dramatic poetry for centuries.

E. Martin Browne explained the accomplishment of the Choruses in *The Rock* as follows : "Characterization is not called for. But a contemporary speech-rhythm is essential, and two developments follow. First, the iambic foot of Shakespearean tradition is given up.... The other change is a final freeing of the verse from the counting of syllables.... Thus, a form of verse much more varied than any before is placed at the service of the theatre."⁶ The Choruses in *The Rock* are chiefly significant, therefore, as a stage in the creation of a new verse form.

Conclusion

We have examined several of Eliot's dramatic works of his twenties and early thirties, both theoretical and practical, which are concerned with poetic drama. We have seen a special kind of criticism in "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama" (1920), "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" (1924), and "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" (1928). The essential baseline which is common to these three essays is the question of initiating a general revival of poetic drama.

As early as 1920 Eliot had already shown a deep interest, almost a passion, for the possibility of poetic drama in the contemporary world. He had written many essays on Elizabethan he had learned his lessons.¹ In 1924 Eliot told Arnold Bennett that he had definitely given up *The Waste Land* form of writing and was now "centered on dramatic writing."² By Bennett's account, "He wanted to write a drama of modern life...."³ That Eliot was interested even in this early period in writing a drama of modern life is evidenced by the fact that he had written two dramatic fragments of *Sweeney Agonistes* from 1924 to 1926.

At the period when he began to write poetic drama, it was out of fashion. Great were the problems which confronted Eliot, and which he endeavoured to solve. He understood that the main failure of late nineteenth and early twentieth century poetic dramatists was a linguistic failure. This can be seen from the fact that when he wrote about poetic drama it was about the language that he wrote. Ibsen had solved the problem by repudiating verse. Eliot knew very clearly that the only solution to the problem was to get away from Shakespeare.

In his critical work, especially in "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," he has analysed the nature of dramatic poetry. Eliot felt the need to harmonize dramatic

poetry with common language, as Aristotle noted : "In the theatre one has to use a type of verse which mingles more easily than the others with common speech."⁴

In his experiments in drama, *Sweeney Agonistes* and *The Rock*, the language is supposed to be contemporary, and the purpose of his verse form was to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech : the contemporary speech-rhythm. Eliot tried to base his rhythm upon common speech and to evolve a verse form devised from colloquial speech.

Eliot's intention of the late 1920's and early 1930's was to justify the renaissance of poetic drama by suggesting that the theatre is socially most useful. *Sweeney Agonistes* and the Choruses of *The Rock* were only fragmentary dramatic experiments in verse drama, but the Choruses of *The Rock* seemed to have prepared Eliot for the writing of *Murder in the Cathedral*. It was with *Murder in the Cathedral* that Eliot was confronted with the problem of dramatic form in its essence.

In 1936, after the success of *Murder in the Cathedral* Eliot declared his general conviction by saying, in a radio broadcast, that he believed poetry to be "the natural and complete medium for drama."⁵ This statement reveals how Eliot considered poetry superior to prose.

NOTES

Preface

- 1 F. O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot : An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*. 3rd. ed revised. (New York & London : Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 155.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Edmund Wilson, *Axel's Castle : A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870 to 1930* (New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), p. 112.

Chapter I

- 1 T. S. Eliot, "The Possibility of a Poetic Drama," *The Sacred Wood : Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London : Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 60.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 62.
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